

BEEN THERE, PUN THAT!

Wordplay in Real-Life Situations

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One fine day recently, I spotted in the news a reference to an organization a friend works with. I e-mailed the item to her along with a note: “Aren’t these ‘your people’?”

She confirmed my hunch and added that she had passed the information along to her colleagues. I then riposted, “Clearly, you practice the ancient biblical maxim: ‘Let thy people know!’”

In two previous *Word Ways* articles (February 2006 and February 2012), I discussed the art of using puns in everyday situations. Both were festooned with examples from my own experience.

Below is a new batch. All are original; at least, I independently came up with them. I routinely do online searches. Often, there are no matches. But given the scope of the Internet and the number of clever people out there, I sometimes discover that someone has anticipated me, though it’s not always the identical pun or meaning or context. Also, while some of these remarks were coined spontaneously, I had devised others earlier and had them ready to deploy as circumstances warranted.

With those qualifications and disclaimers out of the way, here are the latest puns I’ve used in conversation and correspondence:

- A vegetarian griped that the dish he had just been served might, despite his instructions, contain carnivorous ingredients. I pointed out that the mistake recalls that classic folk tune, “There’s a Meat in Here Tonight.”
- A friend enthusiastically recommended a new movie. I had already seen the trailer and told him that the film seemed entirely too twee for my taste. But to avoid hurting his feelings, I added: “What’s twee for me may not be for thee!”
- In response to a complaint about the mysterious formulas that Google and various websites use to generate results, I quipped, “This is surely what they meant by the old song, ‘I Got Algorithm.’”
- In e-mail messages, I sometimes conclude a list of names with the familiar abbreviation *et al.* (The Latin term means “and others”—that is, people—and shouldn’t be used interchangeably with *etc.*) Archly, I add, “And Al, too.”
- Discussing a matter that necessitated immediate action, I appended the exhortation: “If not now . . . *then*?”

- Not long ago, an acquaintance published a book of poetry. I sent a congratulatory message along with the comment, “As Jesus remarked, ‘In my father’s house are many mansions.’”
- An event planner suggested sending a “Save The Date” announcement. I cautioned that this is one phrase that should never be abbreviated.
- In a situation that requires no explanation: “Why do they call it *lubricant*? It should be *lubrican*!”
- Economists understand that government regulations, however well intended, often have unintended consequences. When just such an event occurred and was in the news, I forwarded the link with the riposte: “U.C. You see?”

Decades ago, when I was just out of the Navy and had no credit history, my application for an American Express card was rejected. I soon discovered a solution: Obtain a card at a department store where the requirements are less stringent. Then charge something, pay the bill promptly, and reapply to AmEx, using the store as a reference. This trick worked like a charm.

Some time later, I read an article in *The New York Times* about people confronted with the same problem. I wrote a letter to the editor recounting my experience, concluding with the words, “I wasn’t so much a credit to my race as in a race to my credit.”

A *Times* staffer phoned. The letter had been selected for publication. “Of course,” the politically correct bowdlerizer remonstrated, “we’ll have to delete that line.”

Shucks, I thought. That was my primary reason for writing the letter!

Finally, a relevant technological observation:

If you use Microsoft Office, which includes Word and Outlook, you’ve probably noticed that it marks certain words with a squiggly blue underscore. This feature is *not* the spell checker or grammar checker, which use other colors. Rather, this sort of highlighting indicates a “possible word choice error,” according to explanations I found online. The software is evidently equipped with a list of common phrases that it regards as correct, and it’s programmed to flag any departures and suggest corrections.

This feature may be helpful to some writers. Trouble is, it sometimes springs into action when I type an intentional pun. Examples: “Truth is stranger than friction.” “The best thing since spliced bread.” “I dodged a pullet.” “You could have knocked me over with a father.”

I’ve read about attempts to teach computers to exhibit a sense of humor. In my experience, however, that goal has not yet been achieved!